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## Discernment in St. Ignatius Loyola

# Group Discernment: Caring for the Common Good

By Brian McDermott, S.J.

**G**roup discernment offers an opportunity for teams of people at a college or university to engage in decision-making with a more unbiased spirit than might otherwise be present in the process. The spiritual freedom at the heart of such a discernment offers hope that the decision arrived at will be more richly framed than otherwise and will better serve the common good. In addition, discernment allows the participants to partner with God in the process, thus deepening the resources for their decision.

A major feature that distinguishes group discernment from ordinary decision-making is that each member engages in individual discernment at every step of the process. This means that each member is always asking for the Holy Spirit's assistance for openness, for freedom from bias, and for the grace to find what God wants the individual to bring to the table at each stage of the decision-making. Each member is praying and striving for a good measure of Ignatian "indifference," volitional freedom, so as to be able to hear and do God's will. In ordinary decision-making, the individuals may seek to become free of biases, but they usually advocate for a particular position without even

thinking about seeking the Spirit's assistance to do God's will.

The second major difference from ordinary decision-making is that in group discernment all of the participating members seek to offer the very best input they can regarding all of the proposed alternatives. In ordinary group decision-making, individuals often have their own convictions about the correct way to proceed and seek to convince others of the rightness of their position. In group discernment, however, they desire to arrive at the richest possible framing of the issue(s) facing the group and the most robust expression of the cons and pros.

The overall decision-making process involves four stages: (1) evaluation ("what is the present state of affairs, dimension of the problem, seriousness of the crisis, etc.?"); (2) recommendation ("what are alternatives we might choose to address the situation?"); (3) decision ("what will be done?"); and (4) implementation ("by whom and how will the agreed-upon decision be carried out?"). Evaluation and recommendation should be distinct from implementation of the decision. The roles of the individual members need to be clear at each stage. All members need to do their own individual discernment about what God wants them to bring to the table during the evaluation and recommendation stages. At the outset they need to be clear whether all members will be asked to con-

tribute to the implementation stage or only certain designated members.

The seat of final decision-making must also be clear from the start. It can be a person, a subgroup, a majority vote of the discerning group, or a person or agency outside the group. The decision-maker is responsible for gathering all the input from the members, determining the course of action to take, and explaining the principal reasons for this course of action. If the decision-maker is a member of the discerning group, he or she has to be one voice among the many during the evaluation and recommendation. Subsequent to the group discernment, the decision-maker will need to do his or her own individual discernment with regard to the actual decision ("given the discerned input of the group, what decision does God want me to make here and now?"). The discerned recommendation of the group informs but does not determine the final decision.

At each step of the process members must not seek to answer the question, "What does God want the group to do?" Rather, the question is always, "What is it that God wants me to say to the group to contribute to its corporate discernment?"

Discernment can involve healthy conflict, since God may be asking different individuals to bring forward different perspectives. The contributions of genuine individual discernment will never be contradictory, however,

because individual discernment always bears on how God wants the individual discernor to act freely in the here and now. In other words, in the context of group discernment, the individuals involved are always asking: "What insights, reasons, considerations does God want me to bring to the group at this juncture in the process?" There must be time for individual prayer and reflection before each group session; after that, individuals bring the fruit of their individual discernment to the group.

In considering alternatives the negative should be considered first and then, often in a second session, the positive. All must contribute to the session(s). In the course of the group deliberation it may well happen that a contribution from one or more of the discerners may call for a reframing of the question, issue, or alternatives. The point is to develop as rich a framing of the issues and alternatives as possible.

The discerning group needs to agree ahead of time about how to come to a conclusion about the recommendation(s) to be made to the final decision-maker. And it must agree at the start of the process to accept the decision-maker's decision. The first two stages are consultative in nature. The decision-maker's discernment, on the other hand, is the executive decision. At the end of the process the individual members need to pray for an open and cooperative spirit, particularly if the decision went contrary to their desires.

Let me offer a brief example of the process. A small team of administrators in university human resources is facing a challenge. Higher-ups have seriously reduced their budget for the new fiscal year, and they have to make some tough decisions about how to allocate their reduced funds. They can't continue to fund all the projects they previously underwrote. What projects should be dropped or reduced in size?

All the members of the team have taken workshops at this Jesuit university on Ignatian values and discernment. They agree that they want to be discerning in their deciding. Not all members of the team are believers, but all are willing to relate to Spirit – that is, God or their true self – for assistance in their process.

The first thing they do is to meet and pray for the Spirit's guidance during the whole process. They ask the Spirit's guidance at each step, individually and as a group. Then they individually reflect on the best way to frame the alternatives. Returning to the full group, they share what they have come to individually, listening to each other very carefully. Then they go back to reflect and pray over the input from the whole group, and then they return again to the whole group to share what they sense is the best framing of the alternatives.



After listening to each other they are delighted to notice that they are in agreement that the alternatives are the following: (a) to reduce by 25% the number of leadership for mission programs for administrative staff at the university; or (b) to reduce by 25% the number of leadership for mission workshops for full-time faculty; or (c) to reduce by about 15% programs for both constituencies. They reflect and pray about each alternative by bringing forward reasons against the alternative at one meeting and then rea-

sons in favor at the following meeting.

During the process they are all struck by the changed atmosphere of the decision-making. Three new experiences they name were: (1) there seems to be a marked decrease of personal stress; (2) everyone feels united in seeking what is best for the department and the university; and (3) all are energized by the common task of bringing their best thinking to bear on both sides of each alternative. As a result of this process, many perspectives are "put on the table" and this makes the discussions very rich.

At the end they come to a common decision to select alternative "c": they will reduce the programs offered to both constituencies each year by 15%. The principal reason that emerged was that it is important each year to expose at least some members of both constituencies to the perspectives on leadership for mission. But another conclusion they come to, as an offshoot of the process, is to advocate to the higher authorities on behalf of restoring full funding of the programs, making the strongest possible arguments about how these programs foster the greater good for the university, because they contribute to a shared understanding and advancement of the Jesuit identity and mission. The head of the human resources department agrees to engage in this advocacy, and the department begins the practice – which it hopes will be short-lived – of reducing the number of programs offered to the two constituencies.

Group discernment is a remarkable process that shifts a group's decision-making from being a process it carries on its own collective shoulders to a process that it is shared with Spirit, whose resources and commitment to the common good far exceeds the human resources of the group. Dependence on God, dependence on the deepest ground of our humanity, makes the yoke and burden of making tough decisions easier and lighter. ■